



**Connecting Carers**

*A better life for unpaid carers in Highland*

# What to expect from Counselling

## A Carers Guide to Counselling

*What to expect from counselling, and how to get the most out of it.*

Be sure to go into counselling with realistic expectations. Counselling is not a quick fix solution, it is more a process; a process through which individuals can come to a greater understanding of themselves and their relationships with other people. During the counselling process new ideas and ways of thinking may emerge, enabling you to engage more appropriately with the world and your caring role so that you are able to cope with your life in a better way.

Counselling can help you identify steps you would like to take towards working through, and resolving, your problems. It can be hard work and you might feel quite emotionally drained and heavy by the end of a session, but in the final few sessions you might begin to feel lighter, more positive and more energised.

### The First Session – what to expect

The first session is a little more structured than those that follow. In the initial session you'll probably be asked a few questions so that the counsellor can get a clear picture of what you would like to explore in counselling, and to get an understanding of how you're being affected by these issues. Also, other factors that might be relevant may be looked at, such as any bereavements you've had, any medical problems, and so on.

After this session, the sessions are more free ranging and you may find that you stray from the original topic, maybe even coming back at the end to where you started, but possibly now seeing it in a different way. The first few sessions are generally about building up the counselling relationship, so that you feel safe to then begin to explore the deeper issues.

Normally a session is started by the counsellor asking something along the lines of 'What would you like to look at today?' to ensure that you are talking about things that are important to you at that time. You may wish to pick up on something that was discussed last time you met, or something from the past, or something that happened during the week since your last appointment, or you might like to look at how you are feeling right now.

### Client – Counsellor Feedback

It is also useful to discuss your thoughts about the counselling, because one of the most important ingredients of counselling is to get a good working relationship between counsellor and clients. It is important to work at the ups and downs of the counselling relationship, as this can reflect what may be happening in other relationships in your life. Many people come to counselling with issues around relationships, either in the past or present. So, in establishing a good working relationship with your counsellor, (based on genuineness, empathy and acceptance), you are in a much better position to play your part in attempting to solve relationship difficulties elsewhere in your life.



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Part of the counselling process is simply about being heard. That, in itself, may be enough to enable you to move on. What is also important is the ability of the counsellor to really engage with the client - to build a relationship based on trust, understanding and respect through which a safe place for exploration and possible change can be established.

Counselling is based on respecting and valuing the client, and accepting the need for clients to develop in their own way within their own time. The role of a counsellor is similar to that of a 'facilitator' who enables the process to take place. It is not about forcing change, it is more about encouraging you to reach a point where you are able to identify changes you'd like to make, and for you to then take responsibility for making these changes.

Counselling can be time consuming and challenging, as uncomfortable emotions and thoughts can arise as part of the treatment process. However, counselling can provide long-lasting benefits and can provide you with coping skills to help you stay grounded, and help you modify behaviours that you would like to change.

Commitment to the Counselling Process

For counselling to be effective, it requires commitment and a cooperative effort by both the client and the counsellor. It also requires a commitment to make sometimes difficult changes in behaviour or thinking patterns. An indication of whether or not your work with your counsellor is effective is whether or not you begin to obtain insights about your own thoughts and behaviours that may have eluded you before.

Over time, you should become more aware of yourself and others – more aware of who you are and what is important to you, and more aware of your feelings and behaviours and their impact on yourself and others. You should also feel more comfortable in talking about yourself and your feelings; you, and others, might notice that your communication skills have improved. You might begin to identify short term goals to achieve between sessions.

As counselling progresses, longer-term goals may emerge along with some ideas about how to progress toward these goals.

The end result of effective counselling is personal growth and self-awareness that empowers you to take control of your life and enjoy positive, life-affirming relationships with others.

Some people only need a few sessions to get to this stage, whereas for others, it may take much longer. It is therefore important for regular reviews to be carried out throughout the counselling process, to be able to reflect on what has changed so far, and to maybe identify which areas need more attention in future sessions.

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# How to get the most from Counselling

## Tips on how to get the most from counselling:

- **Trust your gut feeling** – if you feel that you aren't connecting with your counsellor, talk about it. We are all different and therefore we 'click' better with some people than we do with others. If you don't feel comfortable with your counsellor, and it doesn't get any better after exploring this with him or her, then maybe the best option is to find a different counsellor – your counsellor might be able to recommend another counsellor, so do ask.
- **Attend regularly, and on time.** Clients who attend regular weekly sessions, especially in the early days, seem to get more out of the counselling than those whose attendance is more erratic. However, if you have to attend fortnightly you will still benefit. Perhaps commitment to the process is what is most important; that, and making the counselling a priority; especially in the early stages.
- Following on from the above point: **make a commitment to your counselling.** Don't skip sessions unless you absolutely have to. If you are given 'homework' to complete in between sessions, be sure to do it. If you find yourself skipping sessions or are reluctant to go, ask yourself why. Are you avoiding painful discussion? Did last session touch a nerve? Talk about your reluctance with your therapist.
- **Allow yourself some time and space** after each session to gather your thoughts together, if possible. Maybe have a short walk before driving home, so that your mind isn't on other things when you're driving.
- **Spend time between sessions reflecting** on what was discussed in the previous session. If you are having counselling as a couple, spend time together reflecting on this.
- **Reflect on how you're feeling on a daily basis** – this will help you to feel more comfortable talking about your feelings. You might find it useful to keep a journal for this purpose – but remember to keep it somewhere safe and private.
- **Don't expect your counsellor to tell you what to do.** You are partners in your recovery. Your counsellor can help guide you and make suggestions, but only you can make the changes you need to move forward.
- **Be prepared.** Before you go to your sessions, think about how to describe "what's wrong," and how to describe your feelings. One way to prepare is to write it down first. You could try reading it out loud after you've written it down. Hearing yourself say it a few times will help you describe things more clearly to your therapist.
- **Take time before each session** to consider your expectations for that session. This will help you to be able to focus on a particular issue earlier in the session, rather than it taking most of the session to pinpoint that issue, and then running out of time to explore it more.



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- **Be honest and open** – if there's something you want to say, say it. Share what you are feeling. Or if you feel that you're avoiding a particular issue, then tell your counsellor – it can be really useful to look at 'avoidance'. If you feel embarrassed or ashamed, or something is too painful to talk about, don't be afraid to tell your therapist. Slowly, you can work together to get at the issues.
- **Be an active participant.** This is your counselling process; the sessions are generally client-led, so don't be afraid to be an active and confident leader!
- **But be patient with yourself and with the process.** Growth takes time, effort, and patience. All of your coping skills, behaviour patterns and self-perceptions have been learned and reinforced over a long period of time. Changing what has become such an integral part of yourself is very difficult and at times slow. By having patience, and accepting and understanding the natural resistance we all feel towards change, you set the foundations for developing and changing, and for ultimately living your life in a more appropriate and satisfying way.
- Finally, **prepare for the 'ending'**. Ideally, you will stop therapy when you and your therapist have decided that you've reached a point where you feel you've made as much progress as you need, wish or are able to make. In the last session it can be useful to reflect on the journey you've been on through the counselling, and to reflect on the changes you've made. Leaving therapy can be quite emotional. Remember that the therapeutic relationship is a strong bond, and ending this relationship is a loss — even if treatment has been successful. Talk about this with your therapist. These feelings are normal. Not many people handle endings well and some cannot "do" endings at all, and just don't turn up for the final session, sending an email or phone / text message instead. However, we really would encourage you to attend the final session. This can be a valuable experience in itself, and can help you to have easier endings in the future.

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